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OPINIONS

Our Words are Our Bridges

by [REDACTED], '04
Staff Writer

I entered April 8's Teach-In ready for a little fire in the blood caused by the inspirational/angering things I was sure I would hear that day. To make a long story short, I was disappointed. This was not due to the inevitable failure to be able to change everything in a day, but instead the inevitable failure of our students, faculty, and staff to communicate with each other effectively about these issues. In fact, I believe the problem of communication to be one that supersedes even the three central issues of the event that day. The implications of it, as well as some ideas for solutions, can be found within the context of two different and all-too-common comments I heard students make that day, paraphrased below.

1) "I don't know where I stand on these issues, so I'm not sure what to do." This is an incredibly common statement, one I have heard numerous times in numerous discussions of serious issues since coming to Sarah Lawrence. Perhaps my ears were particularly sensitive to it because it has been recently pointed out to me that I use it quite a bit myself. It has occurred to me that when I do, I am acting on good faith. I might not, in fact, know where I stand. However, I have recently taken to questioning myself about it, and have found that

the most important question to ask myself is not "why don't I know?" but rather "how can I not know?" I tell myself and others that I am eager to debate and learn about difficult issues so that I am better equipped to make a difference, but how can I reach any kind of endpoint if I don't have a solid foundation from which to begin?

I therefore call on the members of the Sarah Lawrence community not to make this same mistake. If we don't know where we stand on something, we should sit down with ourselves and figure it out. We also shouldn't be afraid of what we come up with. We should be comforted not only by the fact that viewpoints are malleable, but also with the fact that we are not bad people if our personal logic leads us toward non-PC views. Indeed, we are only bad if we forget our own ability to change and empathize with others. If we develop the backbones necessary to enter dialogues without fear or defensiveness, we will have many more productive debates that will truly begin to lead towards concrete change.

2) "There are certain things you don't say because they're going to offend people." This statement is also something I have heard a lot, a possible call to rally behind the typical politically-correct point of view. It used to make a great deal of sense to me. I actually used to say that I didn't truly believe in

free speech, for I believed that certain things should not be said. I realize now that this is an entirely unproductive way of thinking. I believe that anything can and should be said if it is meant in good faith and with a heart and mind open to empathy and learning. In other words, it is not the comments themselves that we should object to, but the bad faith and bad feelings behind them, should they exist. I therefore answer the speaker of the above quote—as well as anyone who might agree with it—why not? Restricting what people are and are not allowed to say ends up leading you nowhere. It doesn't mean that you're not allowed to get hurt or angry by what you perceive to be a stupid or ignorant statement. But I may make a radical statement myself when I say that perhaps it is not feelings that are paramount in the larger picture. The most important thing is the opportunity for interesting and enlightening communication. Without this, nothing really gets done. I believe this desire to censor and water down to be one of the greatest dangers of political correctness, as it takes away from the necessary richness and controversy of human interaction. I don't mean to sound callous or cruel. I simply believe that we need to look at the larger picture much more than we often do in the heat of the moment of our daily lives.

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Teaching Life Lessons

by [REDACTED], '07
Staff Writer

The Teach-In. It seems like the adjectives to describe that noun could go on endlessly. Exciting. Disappointing. Satisfying. Or, if you'd like, you could put together a whole string of adjectives and come up with a phrase: "A cheap attempt by the administration to pacify students so the retention rate won't go down and the number of incoming students next year (especially minority and male) won't be so much of an issue."

At any rate, opinions about the Teach-In have varied as much as hairstyles in the student body: expressions of individuality that may be viewed by some as irrational, outrageous, and well, downright wrong. For me, the Teach-In was quite an experience, one that I am glad to have had for numerous reasons. But before I address my own triumphs or qualms, I want to speak on the events of the day and what some other sentiments have been in the wake of April 8.

First-Year [REDACTED] was highly optimistic about the Teach-In. "I thought the workshops were very informative; however the fact that many of the discussions were based on actual events was rather complicated and seemed in some ways to over-simplify the issues. They weren't really discounting, but the incidents

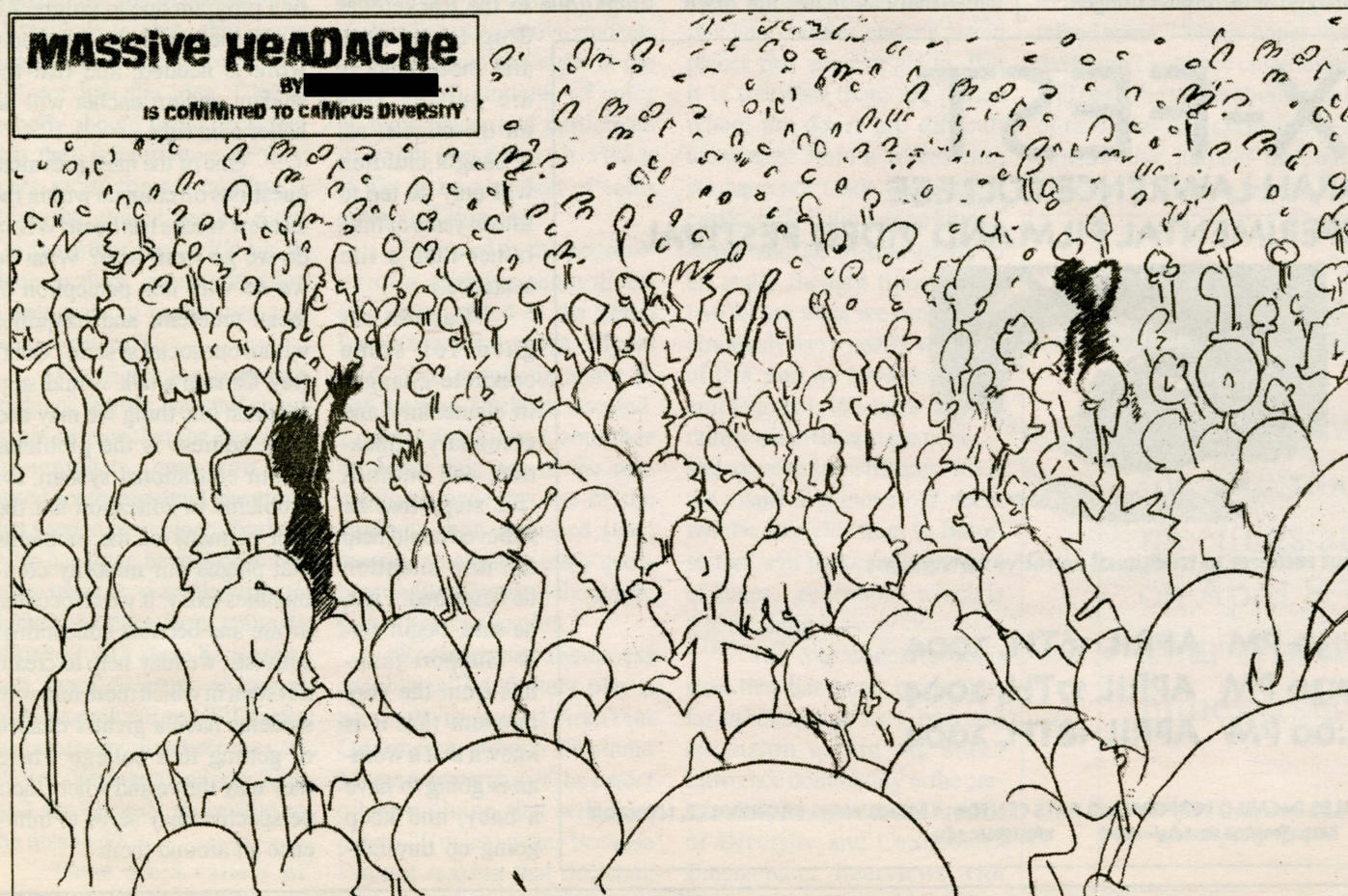
seemed to 'justify' the discussions and slightly remove the participants from their roles in the campus aspect of the issue, allowing them to pinpoint specific circumstances, as opposed to the fact that we simply live in a racist society."

On the evening following the Teach-In there was a film screening, which included the films "Higher Learning" and "Bamboozled." Concerned about what the response may have been to these movies and if students made any kind of connection with their content, I also asked my interviewee for his thoughts on them.

"['Higher Learning'] was made to express emotions," [REDACTED] opined. "It dealt with lesbian [issues], black/white issues, and mis-education, all made to evoke emotion... However, showing the movie wasn't necessarily as productive as the Teach-In. It takes it out of our specifics and says, 'Here's an example.' At the same time, the movie also showed how once [racist] behaviors are learned, small behaviors can escalate. The fact is, it either gets better, or it gets worse. Either we integrate the necessary thinking and stop it... either we become a community, or there's going to become this pluralism, this dynamic [similar to] this movie. This is what can happen. We live in the type of society that responds with violence. That's why they showed it."

But this is only one response among many. Some people were not nearly as insightful and positive, one young woman even going so far as to say, "I'll attend a Teach-In when you pay me my 250 bucks for missing class today." This is an ignorant sentiment, but one that still must be respected. As for me, in my never-ending quest to remain positive, optimistic, and idealistic while I still can in the naïveté commonly identified as youth, I believe that the Teach-In was the first among many steps that will be taken to further right this lop-sided "ivory tower" that is Sarah Lawrence College. I am by no means satisfied with its end; it was ambiguous and not very goal-centered. There were issues with structure and framing, as mentioned recently in a Senate meeting. Also, the participants had a tendency in the afternoon sessions to continuously devi-

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ate from coming up with solutions in favor of discussing—and I would go so far as saying gossiping—about individual instances that have occurred throughout the campus, when it is vastly more important that these people, that everyone understand that the issues addressed at the Teach-In are not concrete incidents that can be told in a newspaper column; they are deep-seated, intangible feelings of discomfort, of mis-belonging, of becoming the perpetual Invisible Man.

In my slightly jaded state of thinking and after being so deeply involved in events leading up to the Teach-In, I beg my fellow students for a viable response to this question: Now, how do we fix this?

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(Within that, of course, we must always remain free to voice our thoughts on what is offensive and ignorant if we believe it to be so.)

As a writer and as an English-teacher hopeful, I do believe with all my heart that language and communication really have the power to change the world. They might not build the physical new bridges, but they work to put the architectural plans and the nuts and bolts in peoples' hands. I share many of my peers' hope that this April's Teach-In will usher in an era of change for Sarah Lawrence. As I am a graduating senior, I know I won't be around to see it. I still hope to leave behind this one little message, and in that way contribute to the college that is to come.